ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. EVETTS HALEY, cowman and historian, is as adept he fine art of working wild cattle as he is in writing history, ch as one professor remarked "reads like poetry." With his he is the active cowboy owner-operator of three South-tern cattle ranches.

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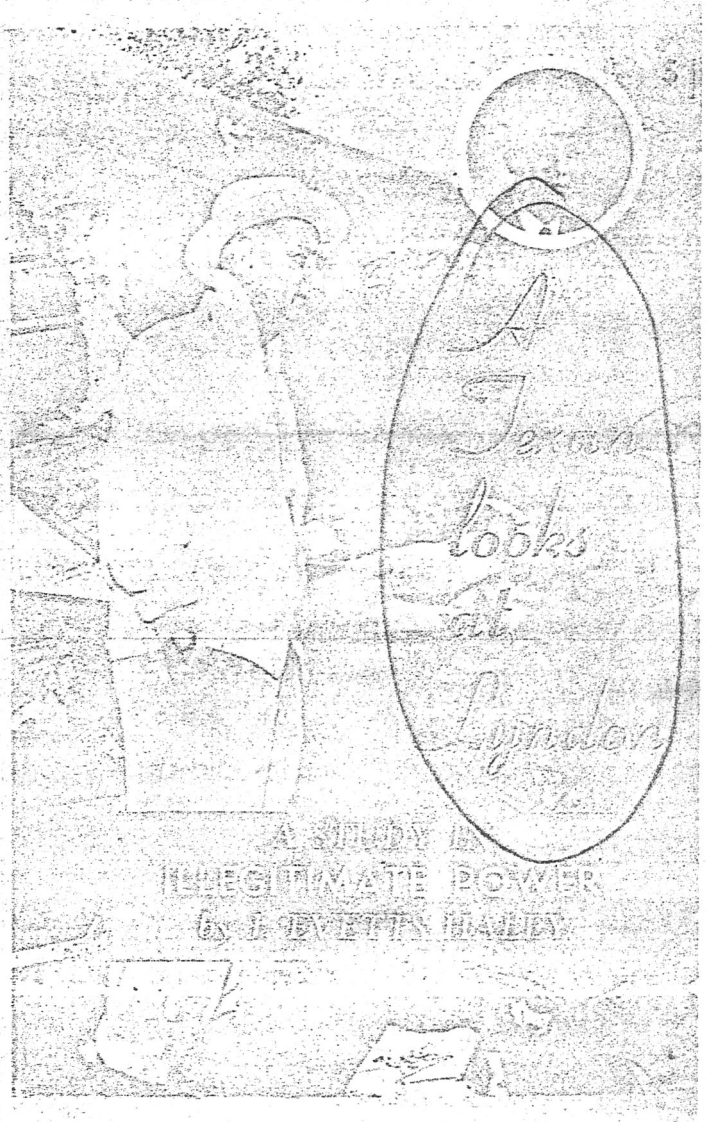
A TEXAN LOOKS AT LYNDON by J. Evetts Haley



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Estes out. Estes declined to sell. Then the Grace boss lowered the boom, telling Estes he knew all about his fraudulent finance and if he still refused to sell, he would expose his fraud to his big backers, Commercial Solvents. Billie simply picked up the phone on the desk, handed it to the Grace official and gave him the Commercial Solvents number.

Such stories as this did nothing to settle the suspicions that somehow Lyndon B. Johnson was interested in Commercial Solvents. Undoubtedly Estes stood in high favor with the company and its President, Maynard Wheeler, who was near frantic when the grain-storage payments of about half a million monthly were shut off by the government.

With the State threatening anti-trust action, Wheeler made a public disclaimer to the effect that his connections with Estes were purely business, which had "at no time violated the anti-trust laws of the State of Texas or elsewhere." On the stand he denied the testimony of Frank Cain, a Dallas lawyer representing Pacific Finance Company—one of a number deeply involved in discounting the paper on Estes' bogus tanks—that Commercial Solvents had offered to set Estes up in Brazil, a report of unusual interest since it was once rumored that he was ready to fly there for refuge.

Despite all suspicions of Lyndon, he was never proven

[11] E.g., on May 21, 1962, a long session behind closed doors was held with N. Battle Hales, who had charged that Estes had "profited hugely from favored treatment" in the Agriculture Department, and with Walter Berger, of Commercial Solvents. McClellan clamped "a tight lid of secrecy" on everything, with Committee members and witnesses alike forced to agree to divulge nothing. *Amarillo News*, May 22, 1962. See too, *Corpus Christi Caller*, June 13, 16, 1962; *San Angelo Standard*, June 16, 1962.

to be involved, though some tightly closed sessions of Senator McClellan's Committee, without revealing who had been heard or what had been found, indicated that the Johnson technique was being applied—and McClellan was amenable.[11]

Before the lid was clamped tight, an FBI agent on the case revealed to a friend that Commercial Solvents were suspected of gangster connections, that they had been in financial straits and it was thought that Lady Bird Johnson's money had helped pull them out.

The fact that Commercial Solvents knew what Estes was doing and evidently approved, as indicated in the story told by Billie Sol, came out in the litigation. An official of Southwestern Fertilizer, at El Paso, later testified that in 1961 he had written to Commercial Solvents that Estes was financing his way on bogus tanks. The Company sent a man to investigate and verify the report. Yet Commercial Solvents stayed with Estes and even after he was arrested and thrown in jail, put up $400,000 in cash for him.

What the public generally awaited, however, was the revelation of the political power behind this crooked business—not just rumors that Lyndon's influence and his wife's money were involved. But it looked in vain, for Johnson's friend, Senator McClellan, to throw any light upon it. Instead the most significant hearings were tightly closed.

However the culpable elements were kept in fear lest the truth get out, perhaps through the unpredictable impulses of Billie Sol Estes. Those who knew him best believed he was, in his own mind, a religious and well-meaning person, who in conscience-ridden trouble, suffered further mental inversion while convincing himself that the way out was by honest confession—which too was in line

with his denominational dogma. He repeatedly asserted to close friends that before he went to prison he would make a clean breast of the whole business.

This was his apparent intention when called before the McClellan Committee. But just before he left for Washington, those around him observed that for the first time he was all but "scared to death." He said that threats had come not only against his life but against his family. Instead of the truth for the McClellan Committee, he "took the Fifth" repeatedly.

Immediately following the assassination, according to responsible Washington sources, a presidential order sealed the McClellan Committee findings from scrutiny, even from Congress itself. Since then various Estes friends have tried to induce him to talk, but he always answers "I can't talk unless my Austin lawyer approves." And Cofer does not.

As in the later Bobby Baker case, there were strong suspicions that the Kennedys were all set to shunt Johnson aside in 1964 because of his connections with the Estes affair. It is known that FBI agents were working on this angle immediately after Billie Sol's arrest. Dr. Dunn had numerous calls from agents inquiring specifically for leads as to Johnson's connections, the agent in charge admitting that they "had the green light" from Washington, which meant from Bobby Kennedy and his brother.

Certain minor contributing incidents were a matter of rumor if not of public knowledge; the report of Lady Bird Johnson's overnight visit at the Estes home; her brother's alleged interest in the Estes grain operations; Billie's own open allegations that he and Lyndon were going into the grain storage business under the Government Point IV program "in India"; and next it was "Johannesburg"—where Billie was to be Ambassador—as "Lyndon has it

all fixed up for me"; and the persistent rumors that Mrs. Johnson's money had saved Commercial Solvents.

Whatever the investigations disclosed is known, in all probability only to the Attorney General. It may well be that they contributed to the ill-concealed enmity between him and the President and perhaps help explain his challenge to Johnson in certain state elections—such as the heavy write-in vote in the New Hampshire primaries. This made the President furious and was followed by Johnson's fast foot-work with the Wisconsin Governor, John W. Reynolds, who used the White House as a sounding board against another threatened Bobby write-in campaign, in his state.[12]

When Johnson's friend, Mayor Tom Miller of Austin died, the Vice-President flew down for the funeral in a military jet. Upon his return trip the plane skidded from the runway in landing at Dallas and Johnson continued to Washington by commercial flight. But the story got out that it had first flown to Midland, where it was parked away from the terminal and closely guarded by the secret service, while two men were escorted to it and stayed for an hour. Then the plane took off for Dallas and its mishap in landing.

In time the report of the Midland flight and the strange and secret conference leaked out. A hurried effort by a responsible person to check the Midland tower records at first went awry because of a mistake as to the date. Properly advised later, the same person returned to check the flight records, but the investigator was told that the records of that day's flights had been sealed by government order. Efforts to secure the plane's itinerary were likewise rebuffed in Washington. The two men who had

[12] For a suggestion of this thought, see Ted Lewis, "Capitol Stuff," *Washington Daily News*, March 13, 1964.